Radar Operator Training.
(As seen by Ron Whitten)

Physical Situation

Training was done at South Head, an outpost of H.M.A.S. Rushcutter, which was responsible for the administration, while the school was run by RDF experts. Built in 1942 on the South Heads bluff was a school with classrooms and, right on the oceans edge, another building housing the training radars – an Australian 286 Air Warning set and a 272 Surface Warning set.
These were used for training both operators and mechanics. Like at Rushcutter there was no accommodation at the school, so all personnel lived out, coming by bus or tram to South Head each morning and climbing the hill to assembly and roll call in the school grounds. Lunch was provided in an old church on the site.

Training Classes

Operator training came under School Master John Gloury, who delegated the task of arranging lessons, content and division of training between classrooms and operational sets. The lessons involved the principles of RDF, the kind of sets available in the RAN, how to turn them on and how to operate them. The lessons included how to plot and report the data received. And how to estimate aircraft height given the range at which aircraft were detected. The time table had to take into account the subject matter being taught, the availability of classrooms and the availability of sets for operators to train on, as these were also being used for mechanic training. Because operators would be going mainly to corvettes it was essential that they understood fully the intricacies of the 286 and 272 that they would be responsible for as well as the essentials of plotting. Other ship operators had to know how to integrate RDF operation with gunnery.

By March 1943 the RN had well developed RDF operating principles and training methods, and these were used as a basis of the Australian training system. The RN also provided training films, like one showing RDF being used on a corvette to detect submarine periscopes and the events following until the sub, was sunk. This was a favourite among trainees.

Often there would be no room in the operating hut, so classes were allowed to spread out on the rocks nearby, often enjoying the sun more than the lessons., This was ample opportunity for the P.O. Coxswain, who would sneak up on them in an effort to find some-one skulking. Mostly he was frustrated.

Training at Sea.

There was a constant demand on Navy Office to provide a training ship, but it took a long time to materialise. In the meantime, H.M.A.S. Kybra, a cattle boat that worked between Albany and Fremantle in peacetime, had been converted for Asdic training. It became a de facto RDF training ship when it arrived in Sydney with a crew of “uncontrollable” RDF operators who had recently returned from action in the Mediterranean theatre and were not greatly impressed by the local “pusser” regimes. It was decided they would be replaced by a group of first time trainees, but by the time Kybra was ready to leave the old crew was back. I had joined the ship as the radar officer, and wasn’t very happy at what had happened. We were hardly out of the harbour before I was called to the operating room to be told the aerial of the 286 wouldn’t turn. The aerial was controlled by an Asdic trainer, which I knew nothing about. Luckily, while leaning on the trainer, my fingers found a switch underneath, which set the aerial going as soon as it was turned. The “rascals” must have decided that I knew what I was about and we became well acquainted. The Jimmy of Kybra disliked the RDF people, who didn’t work ship, so he found as many difficulties as he could for them. Whilst in the Eden area the RDF operators had to take the whaler for a row each morning. A great lark – around the nearest bluff that hid the whaler from Kybra and onto the rocks for fresh oysters, some of the best ever tasted.

H.M.A.S. Hobart

Towards the end of 1944 nearly all the radar operators in the RAN had been trained or re-trained, and it was time to move on. (By this time the American name radar was being used.) So in October, I was appointed to Hobart as second Radar Officer. The ship was still refitting at Cockatoo Dock, where the dockies had gone on strike to demonstrate to Admiral Keyes, RN, that they were willing to work. Working with dockies was tricky. Carrying aboard an urgently needed battery.nearly caused a walkout.

Because I had been in charge of operator training for so long I knew the best and the worst of them, and used this knowledge in choosing Hobart’s operator crew. I had to allow that I would be expected to choose the best, so asked for more and got nearly all I wanted. There were certainly some very good operators among them.

When the Cockatoo Dock refit was finished just before Christmas Hobart went to the Jervis Bay area to work up. On Christmas Eve the ship was preparing for a relaxed Christmas Day. But just after midnight the Surface Warning operators picked up what was definitely a submarine periscope at about twenty miles to the south east. So it was up anchor and back to Sydney, with much

questioning as to whether it had been a submarine detected that far away. I got a final answer to that question many years later at a lunch for former Ikara missile team members. Hugh Jarret, who was second gunnery officer in Hobart at the time, had stayed in the Navy after the war and had been involved with the Ikara missile development. Hugh had been in Germany and met up with submarine people who confirmed that a submarine had been in the area at that time and sunk a small tramp steamer.

This long range detection happened because Hobart had been fitted with the latest British radar sets, which performed magnificently, and Hobart had good radar operators. Later at Balikpapan on the east coast of Borneo, Colin Churchett, the operator of the 281 Air Warning set, picked up an echo in the grass that no-one else could see, which eventuated into a Japanese bomber coming from inland Borneo. This was followed in on the 281, and then handed to the gunnery radars that helped the guns shoot the aircraft down. This was at night so the aircraft was never seen, just an echo in the grass until it appeared on PPIs as a series of dots coming to earth. While the aircraft was approaching the Fighter Director Officer had it on the Kryatron display and was calling up fighters from nearby carriers, but they didn't scramble in time to be of any use.

Another example of how good were Hobart's radars was at the Brunei landings. Stooging around outside Brunei harbour, The Surface Warning set picked up a ship at around forty thousand yards. The usual report went out "Skunk bearing so-so, range so-so." It was well known that the approaching ship carried General Douglas Macarthur, but the US Navy ships accompanying took up the cry "Does rhe skunk smell?" Howe badly does that skunk smell?" And questions of that ilk which went on for about five minutes when the US Admiral in charge called it a day.

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